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Otis Vaughn

Timeless Victory

“My dad is Bull Wesley”, said my 13 year old friend, “Wes” Wesley. “My Dad kicked the winning field goal against Penn (the University of Pennsylvania, Quakers). My brother Virgil and I just looked at Wes and wondered the significance of what he said. It was 1948 and my family had just moved to Tuscaloosa, and it took me a number of years to fully appreciate the accomplishment of our next door neighbor L. O. “Bull” Wesley. Over the next two years Wes reminded us many times of his dad’s great feat.

Bull Wesley was a successful business man in Tuscaloosa, but he had a fair amount of leisure time at home. To my 13 years old eyes, Bull was a very big impressive man – tall but not fat. My family did not yet have TV, and Wes invited us almost daily to watch TV at his house. Bull controlled what we watched on TV, and he loved wrestling. For years I thought wrestling was the only programming on TV. Bull taught us how to play dominos. He had a booming voice and when Bull spoke everyone listened and obeyed. But don’t get this wrong - Bull was very likable.

It took many years for the entire story and the significance of Bull’s feat to be understood. Bull lettered at the University of Alabama “Bama” in 1922-23. He played guard, but in those days a player played both offense and defense – he likely played the entire game in games that were close. 1922 was not a banner year for Bama as their overall record was 6 wins, 3 losses, and 1 tie. They opened the season with the highest score in school history beating Marion Military Institute 110-0. Then they won 41-0 against Oglethorpe. After that, the wheels came off so to speak with a 7-33 loss to Georgia Tech, a 7-7 tie with Sewanee, and a 10-19 loss to Texas. Bad news - next game scheduled – Penn at Franklin Field in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

First part of the bad news was that Bama was accustomed to playing at Denny Field with the usual attendance of several thousand fans. Denny Stadium did not open until September 28, 1929, with 6,000 in attendance. Estimates are that Franklin Field had 25,000 in attendance on game day. Such a host of hostile fans!

This was before TV was being broadcast, but the game may have been broadcast on the radio. Radio broadcasts of a few college football games had started in 1921.

In those years, the Penn Quakers was a national football powerhouse. In 1922 Penn had claimed 6 previous national championships in college football (Reference: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penn_Quakers_football#National_championships).

The Quakers were coached by the famous John Heisman who was well known as an innovator in college football. Later the Heisman Trophy would be named in his honor and given to the best college football player each year, and he would be installed in the College Football Hall of Fame. When Heisman was coach at Georgia Tech just a few years before, he had coached Georgia Tech to a phenomenal 33 game winning streak. This year in 1922 Penn was undefeated and seemingly headed for another national football title.

Everyone thought Bama was playing above its class and it was a prohibitive underdog. The famous sportswriter Grantland Rice predicted Penn would win by a score of 21-0.

In old newspaper sports stories, some reporters said that one of the Quaker coaches visited the Alabama team before the game and made some statements to the effect that Penn intended to keep the score down as much as possible. They did not want to embarrass Bama. They planned to play a lot of players. Bama players were insulted, angry and highly motivated as they took the field for the game.

The game was undoubtedly being wired to Tuscaloosa as it was being played. It had to be cause for optimism when word was wired that the score was zero to zero after the 1st quarter. There was cause for celebration when the Tide took a 3-0 lead on a field goal by Bull Wesley in the 2nd quarter. In a few minutes the word was that Penn had scored and led at the half by 3-7. In the third quarter Alabama took the lead after Pooley Hubert fumbled on 3rd and goal and teammate Shorty Propst fell on the ball for a touchdown. The extra point failed, leaving Alabama up 9-7. Twice in the fourth quarter Alabama missed field goals, leaving Penn with a chance to win late. The Quakers drove to the Alabama 30 in the final moments but on fourth down Alabama came up with a sack to clinch a 9-7 victory. Alabama had pulled off the shocking upset.

The Plain Dealer called the game "intersectional history". Reference:

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/1922_Alabama_Crimson_Tide_football_team

As my friend Wes told me 26 years later, his dad kicked the winning field goal. And Coach Xen C. Scott had scouted Penn and coached an outstanding game. And the team had played their hearts out. And the celebration party in Tuscaloosa probably went on for days.

According to: <http://www.angelfire.com/al/bamacrimson Tide/earlyyears.html>

“Alabama splashed onto the national scene on November 4, 1922 when they vanquished a favored Pennsylvania Quakers team 9-7 in front of a crowd of 25,000 (a mob scene back then). Alabama was well on its way to becoming a national powerhouse in college football.”

The win over Penn gave the Tide so much favorable publicity that they were able to attract the best high school talent. This abundance of talent made the 1925 Tide overwhelmingly dominant in finishing the regular season 9-0. Then their 1st trip to the Rose Bowl, and a victory, 20-19, over the Washington Huskies to win their 1st consensus national football championship.

Almost 100 years have passed – actually 93 years – since that signature win in Philadelphia. I am proud to have known my friend Bull Wesley and his son Wes. I thank Wes for giving me a story that has been a great memory for all these years. If I could speak again to Bull, I would say, “Mr. Wesley, would you tell me the story in your own words as you experienced it. I want to be there as you were.”

Reference historically significant games:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_historically_significant_college_football_games

Reference John Heisman: http://heisman.com/sports/2014/9/10/FB_0910145750.aspx